

## THE PLACES

# BETWEEN SPACES

by Mark Costler



*Beargrass overlooking Glacier National Park, Montana*

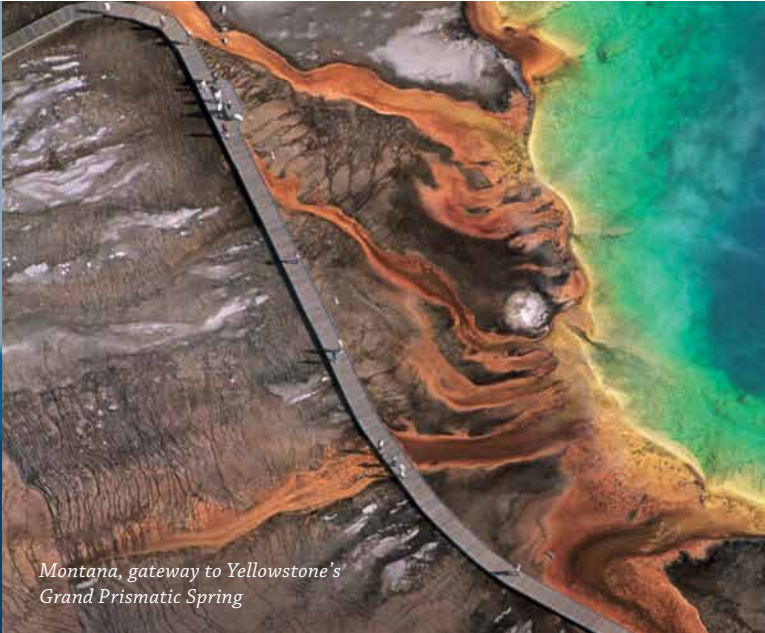
YOU COME TO MONTANA FOR THE VAST AND WILD SPACES, the belief that what you'll find around you—and within you—is rare. You come to stand in the grass beside the road and feel through the soles of your feet the hoofbeats of wild elk galloping down Yellowstone National Parks' Lamar Valley. You come to watch a grizzly bear dig for grubs in an avalanche chute at Glacier National Park's Logan Pass, to notice that, even though he's safely upwind and half a mile across the drainage, the skin on the back of your neck tightens.

The wonders of Yellowstone and Glacier—fumaroles and hanging glaciers, boiling rivers and wildflower walls, bighorn sheep and mountain goats—reveal what you have come to see. But the scope of these places, the immensity of land and sky and the abundance of wildlife, changes the way you see them.



Yellowstone and Glacier are starting points. Between the parks lie mountain ranges you’ve never heard of—Tobacco Roots and Bears Paws, Purcells and Pryors, Centennials and Crazies. Towns scattered in their valleys hold surprises that make you feel both far away from your own home and suddenly cozy in someone else’s.

It might be when you arrive at your bed & breakfast in Absarokee and find an old mansion stuffed with wool felt hats, slippers and rugs from Kyrgyzstan. Or when you notice in a shop on the main street a gorgeous melding of forged iron and blown glass, a rain of color, opacity and bending shapes. And you learn that the creation was born in a shower of sparks in a place called Glasshorse Studios, where a shepherdder with roots in the Azores Islands and an artist of Italian descent imagine each other’s strengths and dreams in metal and glass.



Montana, gateway to Yellowstone’s  
Grand Prismatic Spring

The surprise might come when you’re taking a shortcut to Glacier National Park through the town of Valier (pop. about 500), on the plains beneath the Rocky Mountain Front, and you stop at the convenience store owned by a former Green Bay Packer lineman. At the counter you might meet a woman who renders Greek Orthodox iconography in a painstaking process that requires layers and layers of eggshell tempera painting. At the pump beside you, there might be a rancher who just returned from Russia, where he sent the largest-ever overseas shipment of registered American cattle.

Either may tell you that the restaurant outside of town on the shores of Lake Frances serves some of the best meals you’ll find in the Northern Rockies. You see the wilderness of peaks to the west and the broad, tilting plains all around and think, Really? Way out here?

The mistake would be driving past without finding out how wrong you could be.

The landscape is an immense tableau of natural wonders, but it’s people who guide you through it. In Montana, the gal buying snacks at the convenience store might collar

grizzly bears for a living. The guy who sizzled the grass-fed beef burger you had for lunch might have hooked a 22-inch brown trout in a hidden creek last week. And he may tell you where. That’s the thing: he really may. Montanans understand innately the value of cooperation. Nobody made it alone on this wild land.

“You can come into the Perma bar and find good conversation and good stories,” says Debra Magpie Earling, who wrote the novel *Perma Red* about life on the Flathead Indian Reservation. “Even in all that grand space it’s such an intimate place. I see the vastness of it but I know that it’s shared, there’s a real camaraderie here.”

Evelyn Cameron’s photographs of homestead life in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a rich national treasure today on display in the tiny town of Terry, capture that shared experience. Erase a few half-ton pick-ups, some barbed wire, and the occasional satellite dish and the badlands around Terry have not appreciably changed since Cameron photographed them. With her husband, Cameron left a comfortable life in the English countryside to chop wood, haul water, butcher animals and diligently record pioneer life with her glass-plate camera.

The images range from whimsical—a self-portrait of Cameron standing on the back of a horse—to documentary, and their breadth make Cameron one of the foremost—and few female—chroniclers of the robust life people lived under the soaring vault of blue sky.

It would be a mistake to overlook the people you pass in diners and convenience stores as merely salt-of-the-earth farmers and ranchers, cowboys and Indians. Say you happen to stop in Big Sandy, Mont., (pop. about 600) and wander into a tavern where a local boy has



returned, after spending years immersed in Seattle’s culinary scene, to open a hometown restaurant heavy on whole fresh ingredients. Maybe the dust-rimmed, ball-capped man at the next table spent the first part of his life in Portland establishing a non-profit that taught music lessons to underprivileged urban children. Now he’s back home driving tractor and running the family’s organic wheat farm.

It’s worth asking.

**YOU COME TO MONTANA** to stand in rivers born of towering peaks raking snow from the sky, rivers powered by steep ravines followed by broad tilted valleys. When you stand in those currents, you feel gravity pressing against your legs. Even when they slow, the power of the whole landscape pours through these waters. And when you emerge from the river, smelling like wet stones and snowmelt, you find yourself heading for a town like Ennis, where in a restaurant hidden behind a bar, six people can order six different entrees and love every one of them.

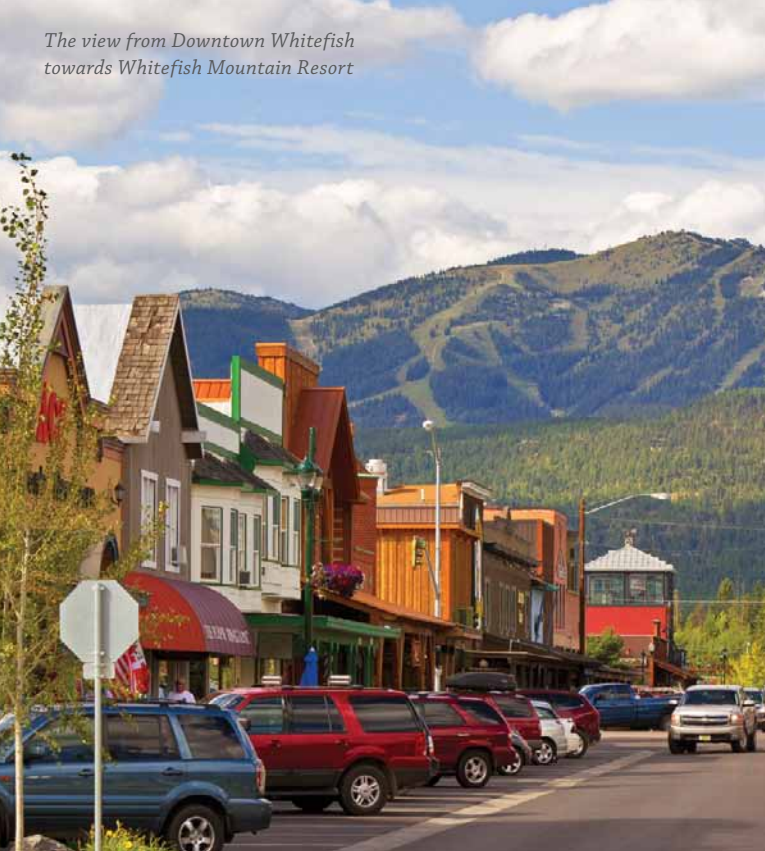
## WHITEFISH: THE CULTURAL BASECAMP TO GLACIER

You come to Montana because you cannot measure what watching your kids pull trout from a wild and scenic river is worth—until you’ve watched them do it over and over. Then you stroll the covered sidewalks of downtown Whitefish, past a vibrant mix of traditional businesses. After lunch, walk a mile north and stand on the shores of a large, deep, clear lake carved by glaciers, sheltered by national forest and wriggling with more fish.

On the slopes above the lake, Whitefish Mountain Resort’s treetop tour and zip lines alternately educate and thrill, while a scenic gondola ride to the summit allows you to gaze deep into Glacier and the Canadian Rockies. Blessed with a ski resort and golf courses, easy access to boating, mountain bike trails and Glacier National Park, Whitefish is a charming, small town with big hospitality—and a gateway to the world’s most beautiful mountains.

After breathtaking adventures, Whitefish’s extraordinary dining experience is created by local farmers and chefs working together, with city-caliber sushi a block away from traditional cafés, all bustling with hard-working locals mingling seamlessly with visitors. The resort’s Café Kandahar’s chef is even a recent James Beard Award nominee. And on Tuesday nights, the Downtown Farmers market thrives with over 150 local vendors, live music powered by wind and sun, and thousands of strolling participants.

*For more information, please visit:*  
Whitefish, Montana: [ExploreWhitefish.com](http://ExploreWhitefish.com), 877.862.3548



The view from Downtown Whitefish  
towards Whitefish Mountain Resort







*Glacier National Park, Montana*

Or perhaps you're close to Helena and the Archie Bray Foundation's Gallery, a bastion of ceramic art begun by one of America's greatest ceramicists. Raised by Finnish parents who spoke little English in the cultural cornucopia that was Depression-era Butte, Rudy Autio rose from the de rigueur adolescent street-fighting to pioneer an art form from the craft of throwing pots. As one of the Archie Bray Foundation's first residents, Autio began churning out a dizzying array of forms, statuary and murals.

Autio's huge pots morphed into torso-like forms, adorned with painted horses and nudes that combined classical Greek figures with the liturgical art of his youth, and stirred in dashes of Matisse, Van Gogh, Dali and Klimdt. His work has been displayed in the permanent collections of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Carnegie Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's Renswick Gallery.

Autio's hometown, Butte, was once the largest city between Chicago and San Francisco and the third American city to have electricity. Butte's Uptown District is still an architectural marvel. Mark Twain performed here at Maguire's Opera House on his world tour in 1895, and remarked that the audience was, "intellectual and dressed in perfect taste—[a] London, Parisian, New York audience—out in the mines."

If anything, Montana's audiences have grown more sophisticated. The Missoula Children's Theatre is a nationally renowned company that sends crews around the U.S. to cast and produce plays featuring children, enlivening the enthusiasm of young people for performing in small rural communities across the country—all while staging top-notch shows back home in Missoula. Further north, on Flathead

Lake, Bigfork's Summer Playhouse has been producing live theatre for 52 years.

Even closer to Glacier National Park, the town of Whitefish features two production companies—the Whitefish Theatre Company and the Alpine Theatre Project (ATP).

The latter, a collaboration of veteran Los Angeles and Broadway actors and directors who have found a second home in Montana, draws performers like Olympia Dukakis, John Lithgow, Jim Nabors, Henry Winkler and Louis Zorich for colorful productions of musical theatre. It's a slice of Broadway on the shores of a sparkling clear lake, nestled between two mountain ranges.

"This place is for dreamers," ATP executive director Luke Walrath says, "There aren't too many trails laid down for you to follow, but there are miles of space in which to blaze one. What better than to dream as big as the Montana sky? That's why we're here."

Whitefish, like so much of Montana, is at heart a downhome place. Here you might find the state's future governor offering to trade a yearling calf for a year's supply of beer at the Great Northern Brewery's Beer Barter. Or catch Bruce Springsteen climbing on stage to sit in with local musicians.

So many of Montana's best performances occur without planning or even announcement. If you're lucky or smart, you'll find yourself in some outlying town, someplace perhaps just a few miles from Whitefish, beneath the sky-scratching gauntlet of Glacier National Park's western peaks, someplace like, say, the tiny settlement of Polebridge, on a late summer evening when a hootenanny breaks out.

There, a banjo player's finger-picking intrigues a fiddler, and soon a campfire flickers on dobros and mandolins, guitars and basses. Voices join in the songs they know while fleet-fingered musicians pick notes as shiny and twinkling as the crystalline stars scattered through the darkness overhead.

This is Montana's trick of distance: when you find yourself right in the middle of the amazing, unplanned discoveries that occur here, the distances between such vast, wild spaces inevitably bring you closer to yourself.



*Clay shards outside of the Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, Montana*

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*For more information, please visit:*

The State of Montana: [VISITMT.com](http://VISITMT.com), 800.847.4868